

## *National Service in Wales*



## Background

From time to time, you may hear the term “National Service” mentioned in television programmes, documentaries, or in conversations and social media. For many people today, especially younger generations, this phrase may feel unfamiliar or unclear.

However, if we look back to the period between 1947 and 1963 in Wales and across the UK, National Service was a significant part of everyday life. During this time, many young men were required to spend a period of time in the armed forces. As a result, National Service became a widely understood part of society and was often discussed within families, workplaces, and local communities.

Its influence reached beyond those who served. It could shape family routines, friendships, employment opportunities, and future life choices. Different individuals and communities experienced National Service in a variety of ways, depending on their circumstances, roles, and perspectives.

Today, many people in Wales still have personal or family connections to National Service. Some remember their own experiences, while others recall stories shared by relatives or members of their community. These memories and accounts provide valuable insights into the past and help us to explore how life in Wales has changed over time, as well as what has remained important to individuals and communities.

The West Wales Veterans Archive (WWVA) is a valuable resource for learning about these experiences. It was created in 2019 and is available on [People’s Collection Wales](#). The archive includes interviews, photographs, and documents from people in Wales who served in the armed forces during the 20th century.

There are over 1,500 items available, which schools can use to support learning about history, identity, and community. The archive continues to grow and has won national awards for its work in preserving these important stories.

## **What was National Service?**

After the Second World War ended in 1945, Britain began to reduce its armed forces as people returned to civilian life. However, the government still wanted enough troops to meet its responsibilities in Britain and overseas. To do this, it introduced National Service through the National Service Act 1948. This meant that most fit young men had to register by law and could be called up to join the armed forces. Women were not included in this law. National Service was a form of peacetime conscription, and it affected many families and communities in Wales and across the UK.

Young men were usually called up at the age of 18. They had to register, attend a medical examination, and, if accepted, go to a training camp. Refusing to take part could lead to punishment by law, including prison. However, some people could delay or avoid service. For example, it could be postponed for apprentices, university students, or others whose education or training would be interrupted. Men working in important jobs, such as farming or coal mining, could sometimes be excused while they stayed in that work. These rules show how the government tried to balance military needs with the needs of the economy and everyday life.

People did not all feel the same way about National Service. Some accepted it as part of their duty, while others disagreed with it for moral, political, or religious reasons. People who said they were conscientious objectors had to explain their views to a tribunal. If their case was accepted, they might not have to do military service, or they could be asked to do civilian work instead. Studying these different experiences can help learners think about how governments make decisions, and how people respond when laws affect their lives.

Age Cymru Dyfed interviewed twenty-five former National Servicemen for this project. The Veterans spoke openly about their individual experiences. Many reflect on what they learnt, which included new skills that have remained with them throughout their lives.



British Army Veteran Dennis Pikes with D company 10 platoon, Korea, 1951

### **What did the National Servicemen do?**

National Service usually lasted up to two years, although the length of service changed over time. Before 1951, men served for 12 months, then 18 months, and later two years. Most completed their service in the Army or Royal Air Force, while fewer served in the Royal Navy.

The resources that follow include short film clips from interviews recorded by Age Cymru Dyfed with veterans in Wales who completed National Service in Britain and overseas. These first-hand accounts describe a range of experiences, including service in Korea, Malaya, Cyprus, Kenya, Malta and Aden, as well as work linked to the smallpox outbreak in Wales. Together, they offer useful evidence for exploring personal experiences, historical context and the impact of service on people's lives.

When studying National Service, it is important to note that 395 men died while on active service during their compulsory service. 'Active service' refers to areas of conflict such as Korea and the emergencies in Malaya, Kenya, Aden and Cyprus. This figure does not include those who died during service because of accident or illness.



RAF Fireman Ernie Hughes with crashed transport aircraft, Kenya, early 1950s

### **Bernard Phillips – British Army**

Bernard Phillips of Llanelli began National Service with the Welch Regiment in 1951. After training in Brecon, Hong Kong and Japan, he travelled to Korea to join his regiment. When he arrived at Busan in March 1952, the Korean War was still ongoing. Bernard could not go to the front line until he was nineteen.

At the front line, Bernard described conditions that reminded him of trench warfare in the First World War. Trenches extended across hills and mountains near the line known as the 38th parallel. Opposing forces held a similar trench system, and the conflict had reached a stalemate, although attacks continued.

Bernard spent eight months on the front line in Korea before returning home. He was discharged from the British Army in May 1953, shortly before the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. He was interviewed at his home in Llanelli at the age of 92.



Bernard Phillips photographed by his headquarters in Hong Kong

### **Bryan Vaughan – British Army**

Bryan Vaughan was born in Eglwysrwrw, Pembrokeshire, in 1937. He began National Service in May 1956 and trained in North Wales before travelling to Singapore for jungle training. He served as a driver and artillery soldier with 75 Battery, 48 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, based in Malaya (now Malaysia).

His role involved driving and maintaining vehicles and taking part in long jungle patrols, sometimes lasting six weeks. During these patrols, soldiers worked to locate and safely deal with leftover ammunition from the Second World War.

Bryan lived in basic “Nissen huts” with no hot water and little protection from the tropical heat and heavy rain. While he was there, Malaya became an independent country. This was also a time of conflict between local groups and Commonwealth forces.

He later shared his memories in an interview at his home in Aberporth.



Bryan Vaughan photographed by royal artillery lorry

### **Dennis Pikes – British Army**

In October 1950, Dennis Pikes was living in Hereford when he began National Service with the King's Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI). After 10 weeks of basic training and 5 weeks of further skills training, he joined 'D' Company of the 1st Battalion. The company was sent to Hong Kong, where Dennis continued infantry training, including long marches in the New Territories. At that time, he expected to be sent to Malaya.

However, after heavy fighting in Korea in April 1951, 'D' Company KSLI was sent there instead. In Korea, Dennis and his unit carried out patrols along the front line, including areas near the Imjin River. They sometimes encountered enemy soldiers while on patrol.

Dennis completed a 12-month tour of duty. Although he was not physically injured, he remembered the dangers faced by his group and the loss of fellow soldiers during the conflict.

After his service in Korea, Dennis spent a short period of leave in Tokyo, Japan, before returning to the UK in August 1952.



Dennis Pikes. R&R in Tokyo. 1952

### **Ernie Hughes - Royal Air Force**

Ernie grew up in Aberystwyth and began National Service with the RAF in 1952 when he was 18. Although he wanted to train as a firefighter, this role was not usually available to National Servicemen, so he chose to extend his service in order to join the RAF Fire Service.

After training, he was posted to RAF Llandwrog in North Wales, where firefighters helped monitor stores of dangerous explosives left over from the Second World War. After a year, Ernie

was sent overseas, eventually arriving at RAF Eastleigh (now Nairobi International Airport) in Kenya.

At this time, Kenya was experiencing unrest linked to growing resistance to British rule, which was part of its journey towards independence. Ernie joined a specialist unit that supported operations on the ground.

During his service, Ernie attended aircraft accidents and fires. His role often involved rescue work, sometimes in very difficult and challenging situations.



RAF Fireman Ernie Hughes driving a water bowser RAF Eastleigh Kenya 1950s

### **Mervyn Rees – Royal Air Force**

Mervyn was born in Wiltshire in 1935 and trained as an engineer before beginning National Service with the RAF in 1956. After basic training, he trained as a driver and was then posted to Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, a British-controlled site used for nuclear weapons testing.

Because of his engineering skills, Mervyn was asked to work in a restricted area for the rest of his service. During this time, he witnessed several nuclear test explosions.

Mervyn later spoke about the long-term health effects experienced by many who served there. He described his experiences as very challenging and reflected on how they affected him and others throughout their lives.

He shared his memories in an interview recorded at his home in Saundersfoot, Pembrokeshire, when he was 89 years old.



Mervyn Rees RAF on his bunk in his tent on Christmas Island

### **Norman Kenney – British Army**

Norman Kenney completed two years of National Service in the British Army between 1956 and 1958. He served as a soldier in the Royal Army Service Corps and spent much of his time posted to Cyprus.

In an interview with Penweddig School pupil Lyra Morgan, Norman shares his experiences of daily life as a soldier during a time of tension and unrest on the island. He describes the

routines, responsibilities, and challenges faced by those serving there, helping us understand what life was like for young people in the armed forces during this period.

Norman's memories, including his time in Cyprus, are part of the West Wales Veterans Archive in the People's Collection Wales. His story helps us learn about the past through personal experiences and firsthand accounts.



Lance Corporal Norman Kenney, Cyprus, 1957

### **Vyron Thomas – British Army**

Vyron grew up in Garnswllt, a village on the border of Swansea and Carmarthenshire, and trained as a plumber after leaving school. In 1957, he began National Service, completing basic training in Brecon and further infantry training in Cardiff before joining the 1st Battalion, The Welch Regiment.

He travelled by troopship to Cyprus, where there was unrest as some groups were campaigning for independence from British rule. During his service, Vyron experienced dangerous situations, including an attack on a convoy in which he sadly lost a close friend.

Before finishing his service, he was also sent to North Africa, where he carried out military duties in Libya in very hot and dusty conditions, which he found challenging.



Cpl Vyron Thomas

### **William Morris – Royal Air Force Medical Branch**

William Morris from Treorchy began National Service in late 1960 and was among the last men from Wales to do so. He served as an RAF medic based at RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire. His role included travelling to places such as Aden and Cyprus, where there was conflict at the time. He provided medical care for service personnel and their families who were ill or injured and being brought back to the UK for treatment.

In January 1962, during an outbreak of smallpox, William joined a team supporting an emergency vaccination programme in South-East Wales. The outbreak had a serious impact before it was brought under control.

William later reflected positively on his experiences as an RAF medic when interviewed at his home in Rhydowen, Ceredigion, at the age of 86.



[William Morris RAF Medic - Smallpox inoculations, Rhondda](#)

#### **External resources**

- [People's Collection Wales](#)
- [West Wales Veteran's Archive](#)

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